

International Buddhist Conference on Tisikkhā/Triśikṣā (The Three Trainings)

In Pali and Sanskrit Traditions of Buddhism
Technical Session 3 Theme: **Paññā-sikkhā/Prajñā-Śikṣā**

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Abstract

The concept of *paññā* (Sk. *prajñā*) occupies an important place in Buddhist soteriological theory. It signifies a distinguishable cognitive activity very different from generic knowledge. It is rendered into English as ‘wisdom’, ‘gnosis’, ‘insight’, ‘understanding’ or ‘intuitive knowledge.’ In Pali tradition, the specific mode of cognition involved is differentiated by the use of the prefix *pa-* (Sk. *pra*) expressing a cognitive meaning which is distinguishable from that expressed by other terms like *viññāṇa* (*cognition*), *saññā* (*recognition*), *pariññā* (*comprehension*) and *abhiññā* (*intelligent*). Making of the word *paññā* (*pa+jñā* verbal root ‘to know’) etymologically means ‘multi-dimensional knowledge.’ The use of both the substantive form (*paññā*) and the verbal form (*pājanāti*), in Pali, are frequent in a variety of contexts. The substantive usage could be analyzed in terms of the verbal usage implying that *paññā* signifies no static entity but a cognitive activity of a certain sort. A person may be called one possessed of *paññā* in the sense that he engages in the activity of cognizing in the particular mode of cognition called *paññā*.

Buddhism is the ‘religion of *paññā*.’ Different from most of other religions, Buddhism’s salient feature is its emphasis on rationality and wisdom. In Buddhist practice, the word Buddha refers to the quality of *paññā* or wisdom rather than the historical Prince Siddhartha himself. Buddhism see things as they are (*yathā-bhūta*). The concept of Buddhism as ‘religion of wisdom’ has been defined even as early as the time of the Buddha himself by his contemporaries (Saṅgha Belaṅghiputta). However, it can also mean Buddhism is a result of Buddha’s wisdom which is accessible to all human.

The phrase ‘religion of wisdom’ indicates that it is a religion which emphasises on ‘wisdom’ as significant instrument of a life. Accordingly, Buddhism does not require ‘belief’ to adhere Buddhism (Apannaka sutta). On the contrary, Buddhism encourages Buddhist followers to get rid of ‘belief’ (Kalama sutta) and replace it with ‘wisdom.’ When one gets to know for himself there is no role of ‘belief’ necessary (Apannaka sutta). This is the exact concept of the Buddha, one who knows or the wise one. If Buddhism has to be defined in one single word that would be *paññā* or wisdom.

Buddhism: ‘Religion of Wisdom’

The most popular Pāli phrase of worshiping the Buddha goes: *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*. In fact, this is a mantra form of the Threefold Training itself. In a teaching format we teach people in the formula of *tisikkha* or Threefold Training in a gradual practice from moral or ethical conduct (*sīla*), mindfulness

meditation (*samādhi*) and multi-dimensional cognition (*paññā*). The very essence of the Threefold Training is also widely chanted in the mantra form. The worshipping verse of *Namo tassa...* in sum simply is I train (*namo*) myself to be aware of my bodily action (*sīla=bhagavato*), to restrain my mind from mental defilements (*samādhi=arahato*) and to develop multi-dimensional cognition (*paññā=sammāsaṃbuddha*). The Threefold Training in Buddhism works both as a means and ends. To achieve the ultimate goal of Buddhism, one begins with from scratch to aspire to learn (*paññā* as a means) in order to meet the ends i.e. the Buddhahood, the Knowing One (*paññā* as an ends).

Buddhism is usually thought of as a path of practice. But it is equally a path of training which is in fact one of the synonyms for practice. We train our minds, but it goes deeper than that. We train our whole being. We train in the very way we live. Buddhism is a religion that train us to be here and now through a development of a cognitive wisdom. Accordingly, we call that very cognitive quality as a 'Buddha.' It is what we call a 'self-realization' or '*saṃbuddha*.' A person may be called one possessed of *paññā* in the sense that he engages in the activity of cognizing in the particular mode of cognition called *paññā*. The commentator Buddhaghosa explains the term by saying that this mode of cognition is called *paññā* in the sense that it is the activity of cognizing in the *paññā* way.¹

As a popular practice, the Threefold Training of *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā* is a gradual practice of Buddhism. It begins with moral conduct to mindfulness meditation and ends at wisdom. The transformation takes places from bodily action to mindfulness and clear wisdom. In other word, the transformation of a being starts at outer bodily actions to inner mind and intuition of rationality. However, in the Eightfold Noble Path this gradual practice is overturn. It starts with wisdom. It is explained that, in fact, both Threefold Training and Eightfold Noble Path are not gradual practice but they are threefold and eightfold practice accordingly. This means they are one in other. It is true that without cognition one wouldn't know the moral conduct itself. Therefore, in a practice of either *sīla*, *samādhi* or *pañña* the essence of the Threefold Training must exist in every step of practice. If they do not complement each other they wouldn't be threefold after all. For example, to practice *sīla* if one doesn't know anything about the *sīla* how can he/she practice it. Therefore, part of cognition should be there to recognize what is *sīla* at first. Knowing the *sīla*, one then would develop attention and intention to observe the *sīla* this is how *samādhi* came to play its role. Completing the factors of ethical conduct and mindfulness meditation conduces to seeing things as they are i.e. the higher form of cognition sprung out from self-realization. The self-realization is, in fact, the ultimate goal of Buddhism i.e. to be the Buddha as a knowing one (*paññāvā*).

In Pali, there are many synonyms for *paññā*. They are: *sammādiṭṭhi* (*liberating view*), *sammāsaṅkappa* (*liberating thought*), *saṃpajañña* (*consciousness*), *dhammavicaya* (*investigation of dhamma*), *vīmaṃsā* (*discrimination*), *ñāṇa* (*insight*), *vijjā* (*knowledge*), *paññīndriya* (*faculty of wisdom*), *paññābala* (*the power of insight*), *paññāparamita* (*accomplishment of wisdom*), and *paññākhandha* (*aggregate of wisdom*) etc. Similarly, in Abhidhana dictionary it gives other 16 synonyms for *pañña*. Etymologically, it simply means condition which conduces for knowing is called *pañña* (*paññāyate etāyati paññā*). It is clear that the use of different prefixes with the verbal root *jñā* that signifies an activity of knowing in general, modifies the cognitive meaning of the term and indicates in each respective case a different mode of knowing.

¹ *Pajānati pajānatiti kho avuso tasma paññāvati vuccati. - Majjhimanikaya Vol. I, p. 292; Visuddhimagga Chapter XIV, Pahhdbhuminiddesa.*

Paññā is recognized as one of the faculties (*paññindriya*) and one of the powers (*paññābala*)² to be cultivated for the attainment of the Buddhist goal of liberation.³ It is also the third and the highest requisite in the threefold path of training leading to the goal of liberation. One has to be a person possessed of *paññā* (*sapañño* or *paññavā*) in order to liberate oneself from the miseries of existence.⁴ The teaching of the Buddha is supposed to be for the benefit of those who are possessed of *paññā*, but not for those who are deficient in it.⁵ *Paññā* is considered as a virtue that must be perfected by all beings who aspire to become fully enlightened Buddhas and is recognized by all Buddhist traditions as one of the perfections (*pāramitā*) for the attainment of Buddhahood. The Buddha claimed that his teaching was not based on the holy and authoritative tradition of Vedic revelation (*anussava*), but that it contained what he had himself known and seen. The specific mode of knowing and seeing involved here is described as *paññā*. His disciples were also expected not to accept the teaching on mere faith but see it with right *paññā* (*yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya daṭṭhabbaṃ*). *Paññā* is therefore considered as essential for the realization of the liberating truths of Buddhism.

The Pali commentaries attempt to highlight the special cognitive meaning of *paññā*, in contrast to the meaning of other cognitive terms in Buddhism by drawing attention to the modification of meaning implied by the use of the prefix *pa* (*pajānanatṭhena paññā*). In the *Vibhaṅgaṭṭhakathā* the meaning of the term *paññā* is explained by including within its connotation *ñānaṃ* (knowledge), *dassanaṃ* (insight), *abhisamayo* (higher realization), *paṭivedho* (penetrative understanding), *sangāhanā* (thorough understanding), *pariyogāhanā* (scrutiny) *samapekkhaṇā* (thorough discernment), *paccavekkhaṇā* (reflective consideration) and *sampajānnaṃ* (understanding with full awareness). The Buddha qualified the kind of penetrative knowledge implied by his use of the term by calling it noble *paññā* (*ariya paññā*)⁶ or cultivated and developed *paññā*⁷ that is directed to the goal of liberation.

The *paññā* can be developed through study (*sutāmaya paññā* or *pariyatipaññā*), thinking or practicing (*cintāmayapaññā* or *paṭipattipaññā*), and self-developing or experimenting (*bhāvanāmayapaññā* or *paṭivedhapaññā*). Once you gain a liberating knowledge then it is called *sammāpaññā*. In fact, according to *Sammaditthi Sutta* by Ven Sariputta even nicely summarizes that having perfected the Eightfold Noble Path it becomes *sammāpaññā* or *sammāñāṇa* then leads to *sammāvimutti*, ultimate liberation from the cycle of birth and death i.e. Nibbāna.

The true *paññā* the Buddha encourages us to develop as a part of practice are: *ñāta-pariññā* or cognition through six-senses; *tiraṇa-pariññā*, or cognition through thorough

² The other faculties mentioned with *paññā* are *saddhā* (faith or confidence), *virīya* (effort), *sati*, (mindfulness) and *samādhi* (mental composure). The same list is given in connection with powers.

³ *Sīla* (wholesome practices) and *samādhi* (composure) are given as the two kinds of training that should be fulfilled by way of preparation for the cultivation of *paññā*.

⁴ *Sīle paṭiṭṭhāya naro sapañño cittaṃ paññanca bhāvayam ātāpinipako bhikkhu so imaṃ vijaṭṭhaya jataṃ Samyuttanikāya Vol. I, p. 13.*

⁵ *Paññāvantaṃ ayaṃ dhammo nāyaṃ dhammo duppaññāssa. Dighanikāya Vol. III, p. 287.*

⁶ *Esahi bhikkhave parama ariya paññā yadidāni sabbadukkhakkhaye hanam. Ibid. Vol. III, p. 245.*

⁷ *Paññā* is to be developed or cultivated and Buddhism conceives of *paññā* as a product of systematic training. The process of training is called *adhipaññā sikkhā* (training in the higher *paññā*) and is to be linked with *adhisīlasikkhā* and *adhicittasikkhā* (training in higher morality and higher consciousness). The distinction between *viññāṇa* and *paññā* is drawn by pointing out that *viññāṇa* must be comprehensively understood (perhaps because it in itself does not give us comprehensive understanding) and *paññā* should be cultivated (*paññā bhāvetabbā viññāṇaṃ parihēyyaṃ. Ibid. Vol. I, p. 293.*)

investigation; and *pahāna-pariññā*, or cognition through abandonment. According to Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta, the result of cognizing all dhamma (specifically the Four Noble Truths) with these three types of *paññā* then leads to liberating self-cognition in different levels starts from visionary level (*cakkhum udapādi*), insight level (*ñāṇam udapādi*), discernment level (*paññā udapādi*), knowledge level (*vijjā udapādi*) and illuminating level (*āloko udapādi*). This is how ones attain Arhatship.

In conclusion, *paññā-sikkhā*, is both means and ends in Buddhism. We use *paññā* to learn and practice to achieve an ultimate *paññā* which results on attaining to be the Knowing One or the Buddha himself. Applying the *ti-sikkhā* or the Threefold Training into modern perspective it is nothing more that achieving what the whole world is going for i.e. sustainable development. Etymologically, sustainable development is in fact Dhammacakka in Pali. The essence of *dhammacakka* is nothing more than the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path. The very Eightfold Noble Path is summarized in the Threefold Training, a very path of practice leading to self-transformation and liberation. Therefore, according to the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta, the Buddha clearly shows that in order to achieve the status of ‘sustainability’ (i.e. realization of dhamma) one should endeavor to practice the Threefold Training to fullness with *paññā* or self-cognition. The modern mundane goal of world development and the ultimate goal of Buddhism are not different at all. Only difference is mundane and mental! While the world is heading for mundane development Buddhism is encouraging us to go more for mental development of sustainability as well.

Thank you.